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AUTHOR Grusec, Joan E.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Two studies that relate to the intergenerational transmission of child discipline practices and techniques are described. The first study attempted to demonstrate that such transmission actually occurs. A sample of 32 Canadian middle-class mothers of 3- to 5-year-olds, and the mothers of these mothers, were asked to rate the frequency with which they used 5 socialization techniques and to react to a series of vignettes about unacceptable child behavior. There were correlations between mothers' and grandmothers' endorsement of the use of praise, reward, and punishment as techniques of socialization and the sex of the child. There was no striking similarity between mothers and grandmothers in their standards for obedience, honesty, and aggression. The second study attempted to determine whether disciplinary practices and the belief systems that accompany those practices are transmitted together, or whether the beliefs alone are transmitted. The reactions of 24 abused adolescents to stories about a child's misdeed were compared with the reactions of 24 nonabused adolescents. Findings suggested that beliefs about the extent to which children understand that their misdeeds are wrong may be transmitted from one generation to the next. The use of reasoning, and the use of reasoning in combination with power assertion, may also be transmitted. (LB)

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The Intergenerational Transmission of Discipline Techniques and Associated Belief Systems

Joan E. Grusec, Katherine Covell, and Penny Paucha

University of Toronto

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How do parents come to discipline their children in the particular way that they do? Why do some parents rely on reasoning while others are more inclined to resort to punitive or power assertive methods or perhaps the two in combination? Why do individuals adopt an authoritarian, authoritative, or permissive style of parenting? Certainly society does not provide formal training for the task of being a disciplinarian. And opportunities to observe the discipline process are extremely limited given that this is an aspect of parent-child interaction that is generally kept quite private considering the intensity and emotionality that often surrounds it. It can quite reasonably be hypothesized, then, that the main source of information about how to discipline is the example of one's very own discipline experience at the hands of one's own parents. Individuals may be power assertive in their approach to discipline, then, for example, because they are modeling the behavior of a parent. Or individuals may be power assertive because they have learned certain beliefs about parenting from their own parents and these beliefs lead them to be power assertive.

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This paper describes two studies which are relevant to the question of intergenerational transmission of discipline practices and techniques. The first study was an attempt to demonstrate that such transmission actually occurs; the second was an attempt to see whether belief systems that accompany and may account for different disciplinary practices are transmitted, rather than or in addition to, just the techniqes themselves.

Although we hear a great deal about the transmission of abusive parenting practices including the use of harsh discipline, there are very few studies,

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in fact, which have tried to demonstrate that normal parent discipline strategies are similar from one generation to another. And most of the studies that have been done have relied on one generation's reports of what the other generation did (e.g., Bronson, Katten, and Livson, 1959; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Chyi-In, 1991). In our work we have actually interviewed two generations--mothers and grandmothers--about their discipline practices rather than relying on reports from mothers about what their parents did with all the methodological problems that procedure entails. In the first study, then, we interviewed mothers as well as their own mothers about what discipline techniques they used. Our sample consisted of 32 middle class mothers with children between the ages of 3 and 5 years and their mothers, the grandmothers of the 3- to 5-year-olds. None of the mother-grandmother pairs lived together so that discipline of the grandchildren was not an experience they were sharing on any kind of day-to-day basis.

We assessed transmission of discipline practices in two ways. First, mothers and grandmothers were asked to rate the frequency with which they used five socialization techniques--praise, material reward, reasoning, threat, and physical punishment--the mothers with their 3- to 5-year-old child and the grandmothers with the mothers when they (the mothers) were 3 to 5 years of age. Second, each member of the dyad was read a series of vignettes in which a child lied, became aggressive when demands were not met, and refused to comply with a maternal request. They were asked to imagine it was their own child in the short story and to say how they would react. Finally in this study, as a sort of control, we asked the mothers and grandmothers about their willingness to tolerate the misbehaviors described in the vignettes. We predicted that there would be much less agreement between their answers in the domain of standards, that is, in what kinds of misdeeds they were willing to tolerate, than in the domain of discipline given that standards are open to a

much wider range of influence experiences outside the family than are discipline techniques.

A summary of the data having to do with frequency of usage of five different discipline techniques is presented in Table 1. For three of the discipline techniques there were significant correlations for one or both sexes between the views of mothers and those of grandmothers: For mothers and grandmothers of girls there was a significant correlation in their use of praise and reward while, in the case of boys, the correlations were between the use of reward and the use of punishment.

Now we look at the degree of correspondence between the responses of mothers and grandmothers to the vignettes, that is, to specific stories about their own children engaging in specific unacceptable behavior. Here we characterized each member of the dyad as either power assertive if she responded to the majority or all of the vignettes with power assertion (e.g., physical punishment, withdrawal of privileges, verbal criticism) or not power assertive if she responded to the minority or none of the vignettes with power assertion. From the second section of Table 1 it is clear that there was a significant degree of concordance in their reported usage of discipline technique between grandmothers and mothers of girls, although not for grandmothers and mothers of boys. In fact, the failure to find concordance for boys is not particularly alarming given that grandmothers, of course, were always reporting about how they would discipline a girl, that is, the mother in our study.

From the final section of Table 1 it is evident that there is no striking similarity between mothers and grandmothers in their standards for obedience, honesty, and aggression (and an additional area of helping). Their willingness to tolerate misdeeds in these areas was unrelated. It is in the area of discipline, then, hidden away from public view and influence as it is, that transmission is most clearly seen. And the present study, in spite of the

lengthy history of discourse about the intergenerational transmission of parent practices, including discipline, provides one of the very few demonstrations that it actually occurs.

The second study reported in this paper focused not only on transmission of parent discipline but on the transmission of parent belief systems which might be implicated as determinants of practices. The question we addressed was whether one generation transmits to the next generation beliefs which are relevant to decisions about which discipline technique to use and whether it is these beliefs which are at least in part responsible for similarity between the two generations. Simons et al. (1991) have recently presented evidence that suggests the transmission of harsh parenting practices is not mediated by general beliefs about the acceptability or usefulness of physical punishment as a behavior influence technique. That is, the endorsement by parents of items such as "Parents shouldn't hit their kids when disciplining them" or "There is oftentimes no substitute for a good spanking" was not correlated with the use of harsh punishment by grandparents. However, recent trends in parenting research have questioned the extent to which general belief systems are implicated in the discipline process and have suggested instead that very specific beliefs about the causes of children's misbehavior may be the mediators of parent discipline. Dix and Grusec (1985), for example, have suggested that parents attempt to understand the causes of their children's misdeeds and that the causal attributions they make will determine the discipline techniques they ultimately employ. These attributions include whether or not the child knew that what he or she did was wrong and whether the misbehavior was carried out intentionally rather than accidentally. From these inferences the parent then assigns blame or responsibility for the act: The more blame or responsibility assigned the more anger the parent feels and the greater his or her tendency to engage in punitive discipline. Dix and his colleagues

(Dix, Ruble, Grusec, & Nixon, 1986; Dix, Ruble, & Zambarano, 1989) have provided empirical evidence that supports this reasoning. Thus mothers evalute power assertive discipline more positively the more they infer that children have understood the rules they violated, had the capability to act more appropriately, and felt their children were responsible for their misbehavior. We have found similar relationships in our own laboratory with a sample of abusive mothers and matched control mothers (Westacott, 1991).

Now we turn to the question of whether these beliefs about knowledge, capacity, and intention are transmitted from one generation to another. Although they may not be as obvious to the child as is the nature of parent discipline it is still possible that they are transmitted, for example, in the words parents use to accompany their disciplinary actions. Furthermore, it is possible that it is these transmitted belief systems that mediate parent discipline. Our attempt to see if parent attributions are transmitted from one generation to another came from a study in which we were interested in comparing the attributions for children's misdeeds made by abused adolescents and those made by control adolescents. We do know from at least two studies (Bauer & Twentyman, 1985; Westacott, 1991) that nonabusive mothers are more likely to make attributions about their children's misdeeds to lack of knowledge than are abusive mothers, that abusive mothers are more likely to attribute malevolent intention of the part of their child in the case of misbehavior than are nonabusive mothers, and that abusive mothers are therefore more likely to report that they will be power assertive with their children. Thus we reasoned that abused adolescents would have learned to make similar attributions and that there would therefore be a difference between our two groups of subjects in attributions as well as discipline techniques they would propose using in the case of a hypothetical child's misdeed.

The participants in our study were 24 abused adolescents between the ages

of 14 and 19 years. They had been subjected to a variety of abuse including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse as well as exposure to family violence and were attending an adolescent mental health treatment centre for counseling. The control group consisted of 24 nonabused adolescents matched for age, sex, and socioeconomic status. We read six short stories to our adolescents describing a child's misdeed and asked them to imagine it was their child in the story and to say what they would do. In addition, we asked them to respond to a series of questions relevant to the story child's knowledge and intention. Here is an example of one of the stories.

"Your 8-year-old son and his friend have been playing in his room. Your hear your son say "I want that toy. If you don't give it to me right now I'm gonna smack you!" You step in the room just in time to see him hit his friend on the arm and grab the toy. Your son's friend begins to cry."

In Table 2 are the specific questions we asked relevant to issues of knowledge of wrongdoing, intentionality, and blame, and the responses of adolescents in the two groups. They were asked to rate the answer to each question on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "not at all" and 7 "a great deal" (or variants thereof). As Table 2 indicates there were significant differences in the ratings of knowledge, with abused adolescents suggesting more than controls that the child ought to have known better as she was misbehaving and that she had the capacity to know that what she did was wrong. As well, it can be seen in Table 2, which presents the number of times a discipline technique was used in the six stories, that controls reported they would be more likely to reason than did abused adolescents who, when they did reason, tended to be more likely to combine the reasoning with power assertion than did the controls. Moreover, the fact that there was a correlation between ratings of knowledge and use of power assertion combined with reasoning of .32 ($p<.10$) suggests that attributions about knowledge could have been mediating

the use of this particular discipline technique. Here is evidence then that parent belief systems having to do at least with knowledge (although not with assessments of intentionality and judgments of blame) are transmitted. So too are the use of reasoning as well as reasoning in combination with power assertion.

In conclusion, the two studies presented here provide some reasonable support for the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission of discipline as well as the intergenerational transmission of attributions about child misdeeds which may mediate parent discipline. In the first study we found that mothers' and grandmothers' endorsement of the use of praise, reward, and punishment as techniques of socialization were correlated for either boys or girls or both. The use of reasoning and threat were not correlated. Moreover, we found that when they were asked to respond to a specific situation in which they were asked to imagine that their child had deviated, the grandmothers and their daughters were highly likely to be similar in their approach to discipline, being either power assertive as a pair or nonpower assertive. This was true when they were both dealing with a child of the same sex, that is, a girl. In the second study we demonstrated, albeit it in a more indirect fashion, that beliefs about the extent to which children understand that their misdeeds are wrong may also be transmitted from one generation to the next. In this study we also found that the use of reasoning as well as the use of reasoning in combination with power assertion may be transmitted. It may be the passing on of these beliefs which accounts for similarity between generations in the way they discipline their children. Other explanations of these particular correlations are possible, of course.

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Table 1. Relations between mothers and grandmothers in their use of discipline techniques and their standards for behavior.

	Discipline Technique				
	Praise	Reward	Reasoning	Threat	Punishment
Girls	.39*	.65**	.24	-.18	.32
Boys	.00	.50*	-.05	-.10	.46*

*p<.05 **p<.01

	Power Assertion	Non-Power Assertion	Nonconcordant	
	Concordant	Concordant		
Girls	5	6	3	p=.05
Boys	4	2	6	NS

	Standards			
	Obedience	Honesty	Helping	Aggression
Girls	.26	.09	-.20	-.18
Boys	.31	.08	-.03	-.05

Table 2. Mean scores on questions about knowledge, intention, blame, and discipline technique to be used for abused and control adolescents.

	ABUSE	CONTROL	
1. As your child hit her friend, did your child know she was acting badly or improperly?	5.94	5.37	$p<.01$
2. Should your child have known that hitting her friend was wrong?	6.26	5.97	$p<.05$
3. Do you think that your child knew hitting her friend would upset or anger you?	5.03	4.93	NS
4. How much blame does your child deserve for hitting her friend?	5.65	5.56	NS
Would reason	0.66	1.29	$p<.01$
Would use power assertion	3.79	3.75	NS
Would use power assertion and reasoning	0.91	0.50	$p<.08$